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DCU Chaplaincy:  
An Introduction to World Religions

# Buddhism

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STUDENT SUPPORT AND DEVELOPMENT





# Buddhism

Buddhism began in India during late 500BCE from the teachings of a prince named Siddhartha Gautama who later came to be known as **Gautama Buddha**, meaning 'enlightened one'.

Buddhists celebrate and revere the Buddha as an enlightened human being rather than as a god or an incarnation of god. The main source of faith and practice for Buddhists is the **Dharma** (the teachings of the Buddha).


Most Buddhists believe in the **Four Noble Truths** and follow the **Eightfold Path** (see next page). Buddhists also agree on rules and teachings governing their own particular **sangha** (community). While there are different traditions with Buddhism, the central teachings of Buddha Sakyamuni are shared by all:

- Nothing in the world is fixed or permanent
- Everyone is influenced by past actions (**karma**)
- Reincarnation or rebirth can occur in human form, animal form, as a ghost, in a blissful state (**nirvana**) or in a state of woe. Beliefs about rebirth can vary according to particular traditions and communities.

## The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path

The central teachings of all schools of Buddhism are based on the **Four Noble Truths**:

1. Life is subject to mental and physical suffering and frustration (**dukkha**)
2. The origin or cause of dukkha can be attributed to selfishness


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- and craving things for oneself; for example, wealth and power
3. The overcoming of dukkha is known as **nirvana**: a state of mind that transcends desire and suffering
  4. One reaches nirvana by following the Eightfold Path

**The Eightfold Path** consists of the following understandings and practices:

1. **Right Understanding**: knowledge that the Four Noble Truths lead to overcoming dukkha
2. **Right Thought**: a genuine wish to break free from desire
3. **Right Speech**: controlling one's speech so that it does not harm others. Buddhists will avoid lying or gossip
4. **Right Action**: avoiding actions that are harmful to oneself or any other living creature
5. **Right Livelihood**: earning a living in a way that does not cause harm or suffering to others. This involves avoiding professions that create or distribute weapons, that promote intoxication, or that involve the slaughter of animals
6. **Right Effort**: paying attention continually to one's lifestyle
7. **Right Mindfulness**: constant awareness about the effects of one's actions so as to avoid causing harm
8. **Right Concentration**: attaining serenity by cultivating the mind through meditation

## Schools of Buddhism

The differences between the schools of Buddhism rest on the emphasis they place on particular aspects of the teachings and the interpretation of rules governing the conduct of the 'sangha' (Buddhist spiritual community).

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- Theravada Buddhism: the Theravada School adheres strictly to the original teachings of Buddha as contained in the **Pali** canon (scripture) and emphasizes the goal of personal salvation for the individual follower. The importance of the community of monks is also characteristic of the Theravada tradition. Theravada countries include Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and Laos.
  - Mahayana Buddhism: the Mahayana School has less emphasis on the monastic code of conduct, and so is less formally strict. The emphasis is on the importance of becoming a Buddha for the salvation of living beings. Zen Buddhism, a branch of Mahayana Buddhism, strongly emphasises the practice of meditation. Mahayana countries include China, Japan, Vietnam and Korea.
  - Vajrayana Buddhism: differs from the Mahayana School in that it places emphasis on developing and accepting a personal **guru** (teacher). Meditation and special sayings known as 'mantras' are also characteristics of the Vajrayana tradition. Vajrayana countries include Tibet, Mongolia and Nepal.

## Buddhist Practices

Buddhism has no prescribed dress code for ordinary Buddhists. Buddhist monks shave their heads and wear a robe that is usually brown, tan, orange, red, maroon or grey. Nuns usually wear a brown, white, grey or pink robe. Regulations governing food depends on which branch of Buddhism is practised and in what country. Meat and fish are generally not eaten by the Theravada and Mahayana traditions because it is considered bad karma (since animals can be reincarnated as humans and vice versa). Buddhist monks fast from all food on the new and full moon of each lunar month. Buddhists generally abstain from mind altering substances such as alcohol and drugs.



## Place and Style of Worship

The main place of worship for a Buddhist is the temple, which often includes a shrine and a statue of Buddha on festival days. Buddhists make offerings of flowers, light candles and incense in front of the statue and perform meditation. Worship is commonly in the form of chanting Buddha's teachings, meditation and mantras.


## Buddhist Festivals and Celebration Dates

The dates and the way that festivals are celebrated vary between countries and Buddhist traditions. Most Buddhists use the lunar calendar.

**Buddha Day** is considered the most important festival of the Buddhist year. Buddha Day commemorates the birth and enlightenment of Buddha in Mahayana Buddhist countries. In Theravada countries, Buddha Day is also known as **Wesak Day** and it celebrates the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha. Buddha Day is commonly celebrated with the 'Bathing of Buddha' whereby water is poured over the shoulders of the Buddha as a reminder of the need to purify the heart and mind. Dancing dragons, lanterns made out of paper and wood, releasing caged birds and making origami paper crane decorations are other ways in which Wesak Day is celebrated across different traditions. Offerings of food to monks and flowers/incense for shrines and temples are also made as signs of respect.

**Dharma Day (Asalha Puja Day)** is often celebrated with readings from Buddhist scriptures, providing an opportunity to reflect on their contents. Collective ritual celebrations in a ceremonial manner are also common.

**Sangha Day (Magha Puja Day)** is the second most important Buddhist festival and celebrates the community of followers of the teachings of



Buddha. The Sangha specifically includes those who have left home to follow the spiritual path such as monks and nuns, but can also include lay followers of the teachings of Buddha. Sangha Day has become a prominent festival amongst Western Buddhists and is considered a traditional time for the exchange of gifts.

## Visiting a Buddhist Temple

Remove your shoes. Do not bow to the shrines. Do not bring meat or fish products in to the temple.



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